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ABSTRACT

Developments in Mexican higher education and an agenda for a national strategy for 1987-1988 are discussed in a paper prepared for the Mexican secretary of public education. Higher education has experienced quantitative growth and geographic decentralization of educational services. To accommodate the growth in the student population, increasing numbers of teachers have been employed. Additional positive developments include: increased numbers of technological institutes, the creation of terminal intermediate educational programs, and the incorporation of the concept of university autonomy into the nation's constitution. On the negative side, the following are cited: the copying of academic programs from traditional areas of knowledge without paying attention to social needs; financial problems, leading to disparity among educational subsystems; resource allocation primarily to teaching and administrative functions; and decreasing salaries and investments in research and extension activities. The national strategy for 1987-1988, called the Comprehensive Program for the Development of Higher Education, seeks to improve academic standards, to consolidate the national system of higher education, and resolve financial difficulties. The national strategy takes into consideration national productivity needs, and the improvement of curriculum and research within higher education.(SW)

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THE COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: NATIONAL STRATEGY (1987-1988)

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INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive Program for the Development of Higher Education (PROIDES) 1987-1988 is the result of a participative and dynamic process involving public and private institutions of higher - education, as well as representatives of the federal and state governments and of various social sectors. This effort shows the mutual committment of both the educational institutions and the Mexican State for planning together the development of higher learning.

PROIDES 1987-1988 is comprised of the following:

a) a National Strategy version, which includes some preliminary remarks on the antecedents of higher education planning, a diagnosis of this educational level, and a set of strategies formulated as specific objetives, policies and goals.

b) a document describing the National Projects aimed at the solution of those problems with higher priority

c) and a set of state and institutional plans that are the result of the comprehensive process and are designed using PROIDES as a general framework.

This paper will only refer to the first document, the National Strategy.

1. DIAGNOSIS

Mexico's higher education great accomplishment is related to its quantitative growth. In 1960 there were 76,000 students enrolled in higher education, twenty five years later the enrollment increased to 1,107,000 students. Social impact of this growth is illustrated by the fact that in 1970 one out of 20 adolescents studied higher education, while in 1985, despite the demographic growth, this proportion changed to 1 out of 7.

Another attainment is related to the geographic decentralization of the educational services. In 1970, 53.2% of the students of higher education were enrolled in institutions located in Mexico City. By 1985 this proportion changed, so that 75.4% of the students were enrolled in institutions operating in the rest of the country (31 states).

In order to receive the impressive amount of students, institutions were moved to hire increasing numbers of teachers. Only from 1979 to 1985, 37,500 new teachers were incorporated into the system. Amount which represents 39% of the current teacher population.

Another figure that illustrates higher education growth is the following: in 1970 there were 16 technological institutes, currently there are 83 institutions of this sort, operating

in the country.

Higher education's social function and its influence on the youth has been of a great importance in Mexico, - specially when taking into account that, only recently, the country began to develop terminal intermediate educa tional programs.

Perhaps one of the most valuable assets of Mexico's higher education is ideological diversity. Academic freedom and the critical function intrinsic to this educationallevel has been strenghthened through a mutual respect between the - gobernment and the educational institutions. This situation is a positive sign of social maturity. In 1979, mexican - government reformed legislation in order to incorporate the concept of university autonomy into the nation's constitution. On the other hand, higher education institutions, despite the economic and social crisis,the country is facing up, proved to be responsible enough by performing their - tasks congruent with their nature, social aims and basic functions.

The rapid growth experienced by higher education in the last 25 years was, however, the cause of improvisation, disparity and concentration of programs. Many of the new personnel has not the proper skills to deal effectively with the teaching, research, extension and administrative

processes. A good deal of academic contents have been copied from traditional programs which lack innovative approaches to the current and future social needs. On the other hand they are not responding to the impressive recent developments in science, technology and the humanities.

Disparity among education subsystems is high. With the exception of some institutions, academic standards of several universities, technological and normal education institutes are poor. The same is true with respect to the basic functions of higher education. The teaching and administrative functions have concentrated the most significant portion of the budget, which endangers the research and extension programs.

Concentration of academic programs on traditional areas of knowledge such as social sciences and administration is worrying. Students enrolled in professional studies such as Law, Accounting and Administration represent 26% of the total population. In total, the area of social sciences and administration comprises 44% of all students in higher education. More dramatic figures are observed in graduate studies and in research activities. Strategic areas for the country's development are not covered - sufficiently.

The financial condition of this educational level as well as that of the rest of the social programs is disturbing. Although public investment for higher education has increased from 1.8 billion pesos to 28.7 billions in the last seven years, it has not been enough to cope with inflation. While in 1977, 0.74% of the GNP was allocated to this educational sector, in 1984 the proportion decreased to 0.57%. All social services show the same pattern as a consequence of the foreing debt. Such a situation is even more devastating when taking into account the demographic growth and the consequent -- increase of the population demand for social services.

Besides the financial crisis, public institutions have shown to be increasingly more dependent on federal subsidies. They represent, up to this date, more than 90% of their total - budget; while state funds and money obtainned through their own fees and services have been declining year after year.

The impact of this situation is obvious. As it was said, most of the money is allocated to the teaching and administrative functions. The increasing student population has demanded more programs, teachers and facilities. But, at the same time, salaries and investments in research and extension activities have been decreasing. Many institutions, as an additional consequence, have reported a flight of qualified personnel to more competitive professional areas.

The planning function and the coordination between institutions to share experiences and resources have been identified as a useful mean to cope with the nations's crisis. Even when very positive steps have been taken in that direction, is still necessary to attain better flows of communication, higher levels of participation from academics and a stronger relationship between planning and the decision making processes. The administrative structure of institutions has been identified as greatly concentrated and with high indices of bureaucratic procedures.

2. NATIONAL STRATEGY

The Comprehensive Program for the Development of Higher Education (PROIDES): National Strategy 1987-1988 is directed to improve the academic standars, so that this educational sector deals more effectively and efficiently with the country's problems and needs. At the same time, is oriented to consolidate the national system of higher education in order to attain a proper balance between the educational services of the several regions of the country. And, finally, to cope and solve financial limitations resulting from the economic crisis.

Mexico's higher education is expected to generate the reguired knowledge, human resources and extension programs to support or orient those goals related to national develop

ment. In that sense, it has to contribute to the solution of problems in areas such as: Food, Living, Education, - Health, Ecology, Energy, Transportation, Agro-industry, and the production of Capital Goods competitive in the international market. This last aspect is closely related to Mexico's entrance to the GATT.

In relation to the student demand, it is necessary to orient, at a proper time, the student flow toward alternative educational programs such as terminal intermediate programs,and technical high school studies. Also, to modify the current offer of professional studies to areas closely related to productivity, and to continue supporting decentralization of the educational services to all regions of the country. With respect to the research function, graduate studies and the extension programs, it will be essential to support those academic projects, groups, centers and studies oriented to the problems with a high priority for Mexico's development.

Human resources participating in educational services must be object of special concern through development programs, - better working conditions and salaries, and a greater precision and evaluation of their tasks and obligations.

Mexican Government must maintain its committment to continue supporting higher education because of its important role in social change. But, in the same way, all sectors of society,

particularly those who benefit directly from its services should contribute more effectively to improve the financial resources of higher education. Institutions, on their part, have to obtain a significant financial discipline by means of more efficient planning, programming, budgeting, evaluation and control techniques and procedures.

Higher education planning must be improved so that a better relationship between national needs and the educational programs is obtained, at the state and regional level. Technological and organizational support and technical assistance will be essential to improve the information systems, as well as the participation of all academic departments and representatives of the various social sectors in the planning process.

Curriculum innovation has to take place in order for the teaching function to be more flexible, oriented toward a general training and with an interdisciplinary approach. Special attention should receive the designing of new systems of intruction which provide a better education to a larger number of students. Cybernetics and communication technology would play an important role on this matter.

Research must be an institutional task, properly planned and supported so that is based on academic excelence, oriented to generating knowledge and technology in accordance with national and regional priorities. That only will be possible

by impoving the resources involved in this function.

Finally extension programs should affirm national values and culture, spread out universal knowledge and pay - attention to community problems which are related to higher education nature and goals. A great importance would have the productivity problems of the economic sector. Institutions might have an important effect on generating intermediate technology and organizational processes to improve productivity and, in doing so, obtaining additional financial resources.